

The Weight and Breadth of Evidence: Some Reflections on the Strengths of International Education and Development Research

My recent IJED editorials have been more thematic in nature than earlier ones and the dominant theme has been a response to the rising agenda regarding what counts as good evidence about international education and development. This rising agenda needs to be seen as emanating from particular constituencies, particularly international agencies and a range of thinktanks seeking to service and influence them, and its role in advancing their interests needs to be explored.

However, here my more modest goal is to use this editorial as a reflection on the richness of approaches to researching international education and development, using this single issue of IJED as an exemplar of this. I will not be defensive in the face of an onslaught of assertions that the combination of evidence-based policy and experimental methods is the only legitimate mode of debate in the field, and that only some topics are worth studying, or that only certain topics matter because of their policy-relatedness or propensity to generate appropriate types of evidence. Rather, I want to celebrate the reality of the field, which is far richer and varied than this narrow and impoverished would-be orthodoxy.

One issue of IJED cannot reflect the full range of themes, methodologies, methods, theoretical frameworks and authorial backgrounds that have enriched work on international education and development over the history of the field (cf. Crossley, Broadfoot and Schweisfurth, 2007; McGrath, 2010). Nonetheless, even such a small sample makes the point powerfully that this is a field of divergence and diversity and it is through reading across the range of approaches that deep understandings of the complex nature of education and development emerges.

That we have contributions in this single issue from authors based in five continents, and from NGOs and international agencies as well as universities, is not unusual but serves as a reminder that the story of international education and development must be a polyphony, and one that is generated from differing cultures, interests and ideologies. In spite of the monocultural tendencies of research funding to mirror the MDGs in this field, authors continue to have concerns with early years, secondary, vocational and adult education, and on international policymaking and teacher development, as well as work more closely fitted to questions of access to and quality of education for all.

There is room to for considerable variation in methodologies and methods. Qualitative work in the interpretivist and critical theory traditions is seen in work that produces ethnographies of schools and kindergartens; documentary analysis of policy discourses, both contemporary and historical; reflections on critical incidents in the author's own teaching and case studies of projects. Quantitative work in the issue makes use of survey based psychological research on beliefs and motivations, cohort studies; analysis of education management information systems (EMIS) data and hierarchical multiple regression analysis of test results and socio-economic status.

The different traditions inevitably use theory in different ways, indeed the term means something very different across the papers. Inevitably, given the nature of the field, some

papers have very little explicit theory in them. This is particularly the case with some of the quantitative work, which is based loosely in assumptions regarding school effectiveness and, even more lightly, in assumptions regarding how this relates to development. For some of the qualitative papers, there are increasingly familiar theoretical groundings in postcolonial theory, sociocultural theory and the capabilities approach.

Inevitably, this one issue is only a snapshot of the variety of international education and development work. There is nothing from the neoclassical economics or political economy traditions, for instance; both important strands of work throughout the journal's history. There is nothing about higher education (beyond admissions tests), school leadership or education-health links, to name but three important educational themes of recent years.

However, such absences simply serve to point even more clearly to the huge richness of the field. It has both a depth of long-term research in a range of disciplinary traditions and on a set of topics, as well as a breadth across these disciplines and topics. It is informed by a range of ideologies, epistemologies and methodologies and is made better by this. We cannot reduce this intellectual biodiversity to a single monoculture. There is no correct model of international education and development or of researching this nexus. This should be a matter for celebration and not something that has to be defended against narrow vested interests who seek to benefit from impoverishing the field.

References

Crossley, M., Broadfoot, P., Schweisfurth, M., (Eds.), 2007. *Changing Educational Contexts, Issues and Identities*. RoutledgeFalmer, London.

McGrath, S., 2010. Education and development: Thirty years of continuity and change. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 30, 6, 537–543.

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